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Creating Reality TV – The Programme Maker Viewpoint

This chapter explores how to create compelling reality television ‘*Keeping up with the Kardashians*’ (KUWTK) style. As authors we have both worked on reality formats and now as academics, we are able to deconstruct the format of these types of shows from an insider’s point of view. In this essay we go behind the scenes of the popular reality TV show to reveal the mechanics of the television format, explain the casting dynamics, as well as the key ingredients that go into a successful reality series, from a programme maker’s point of view.

Before KUWTK, the Kardashians were a well-known wealthy family on the social scene in Los Angeles, who had gained notoriety courtesy of lawyer father Robert Kardashian, who was most famous as OJ Simpson’s trial lawyer. In 2007 they burst on to our screens in their very own reality series devised by Ryan Seacrest and are now one of the most famous families in America.

Ryan Seacrest spotted their chemistry, which translated on to television. A television programme’s success lives or dies by the strength of the casting and casting directors are a vital part of finding contributors for non-scripted programmes. The contributors are the stars of reality TV. You don’t have to love them, but you have to engage with them.

Here we will be covering the mechanics of the show and touching on the thematics of fashion and beauty that are a central part of the Kardashians’ success story. We will also look at a brief history of *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and how it fits into the television landscape now littered with reality shows. With over 150 episodes of KUWTK produced we will ask how the show has evolved from its sunny bright and breezy feel to a much more raw, edgy feel. More importantly how has the series maintained its’ appeal to the audience? Is it through clever branding? Is Kris Jenner, the show’s matriarch, responsible for that, the mastermind behind the brand? Is social media to thank for giving viewers a direct line to Kim Kardashian and co? And what is the future of the series? Can we expect another 150 episodes?

Reality television’s definition according to the Oxford English Dictionary 2016 ‘television programmes in which ordinary people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative.’

Reality television as we recognise it today, using long used fly-on-the-wall observational filming techniques, really exploded on our screens in the noughties with the introduction of such global formats as *Survivor* in 2001 broadcast in the UK on ITV, which saw contestants battling it out to be the last one standing on a desert island and Endemol’s *Big Brother* in 2000, first broadcast in the Netherlands, described as a social experiment where participants try and avoid being voted off by their peers. These types of formats, often competition-based, had the added drama of the elimination that had not been seen in this form before, where the viewer at home could affect the show’s outcome and the character’s fate by an interactive vote. Reality TV voting gives viewers

a sense of ownership and creates water-cooler moments as audiences become engaged and enraged by what is happening on the show.

In the last decade the UK has seen a move away from studio reality TV and an increase in reality formats shot in 'real life' situations on location such as Lime Picture's *The Only way is Essex*, first screened in 2010 and Monkey Kingdom's *Made in Chelsea* in 2011. Both BAFTA winning series follow the glamorous people of the area in an observational documentary style. These shows try to mimic the appearance and structure of soap opera, with plenty of drama and cliffhangers. Often these formats focus on relationships and entanglements between the on-screen talent. Compelling television is the name of the game and both the production and cast ensure the camera is rolling at the most dramatic moments. Celebrity versions following celebrities about their daily activity are big business: *The Osbournes* (MTV 2002), *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (E! 2007), and *The Anna Nicole Show* (E! 2002) were all international hits and commercial successes.

How the Kardashians was commissioned

KUWTK is the brainchild of executive producer Ryan Seacrest. Seacrest, well known as presenter of *American Idol*, one of America's longest running and successful talent shows (Fremantle Media North America and 19 Entertainment for Fox, 2002 – 2016) and was according to an interview in *Haute Living* (Schreffler, 2015) inspired by reality shows like MTV's *The Osbournes* and wanted to replicate their success.

The Kardashians were not completely unknown in the media world. Kim Kardashian was best friends with Paris Hilton and she hung around with a celebrity Hollywood crowd as well as being caught up in a sex tape incident (O'Toole, 2013). This element of notoriety would certainly appeal to a programme maker as it provides an immediate way to connect with the media and get people talking and this is the first step to getting a commission.

For a programme to get commissioned, a commissioner, the TV executive who will provide the budget, or significant proportion of the budget for a show one of the most important factors is the programme ratings. So a family like the Kardashians that already had an element of fame ticks that box but that in and of itself would not be enough. You still need to get the right cast set of players and Ryan Seacrest understood that casting is critical to the success of any show. Casting for this type of show is particularly difficult, as it involves not just one individual but a whole family. Furthermore, this type of show is rather intrusive, looking in on the family dynamics and everybody needs to feel comfortable in front of the cameras and equally committed to the show.

After asking casting directors to find families interested in taking part in a new reality format, the Kardashians were mooted as a possibility. Seacrest sent a camera operator to film a taster of the Kardashians having a barbecue to test their on screen presence. He reports that he knew instantly they were the perfect family for a reality show.

I remember perfectly: [the cameraman] called me from their house Sunday afternoon and said, 'It's absolutely golden; you're going to die when you see this tape. They're so

funny, they're so fun, there is so much love in this family and they're so chaotic — they throw each other in the pool! (Schreffler, 2015)

The tape was the beginning of a long and successful TV partnership with the Kardashians and the E! network in the USA. KUWTK first aired on E! in 2007 and was an instant hit for the network who realising the power of the brand went on to launch one off specials of family events and spin off shows such as *Kourtney and Kim Take Miami* (2009), *Khloe and Lamar* (2011), *Kourtney and Kim Take New York* (2011) *Kourtney and Kim Take The Hamptons* (2014) and *Dash Girls* (2015). KUWTK is now the E! network's flagship show and one of the channel's most popular shows.

How the series has evolved

In season one the show trailer depicts, in many ways, a modern day version of *The Waltons* (1971-81)– it has a light humorous tone and feel – we see a mum (Kris Jenner) dad (Bruce Jenner, now Caitlyn Jenner) and all the Kardashian/Jenner daughters, Kourtney, Khloe, Kim, Kendall, Kylie and son Rob. The music is upbeat and jolly – the family all look beautifully presented and fashionable. The star of the show has always been Kim – even in this very first clip she is ring fenced as the star of the show – her family members ask where she is and she breezes in late, looking glamorous in a skin tight red dress – posing and pouting and playfully hogging the camera, firmly taking ownership of the camera. The audience is aware that this is 'the Kim show' but all the other members of the family play a key element in its success and the audiences' fascination with the format. Kim does not and cannot exist without her family. This is the appeal of the show. The warts and all revelations and family dynamics of a wealthy, aspirational, glamorous family.

Now if you take a look at the most recent trailer for season 11 in 2015 the tone of the show has dramatically changed. This reflects the fact that the family are now huge international mega stars and Kim is now married to Kanye West, one of the most successful rap singers in the world and her life has changed dramatically since season one – now she is a mother to baby girl North and the clip shows her and Kanye heading to Jerusalem for the baptism. Aesthetically the trailer is edgier in tone, as well as longer in length. This family is about as far removed from the saccharine sweet, wholesome image of a modern day Waltons as is possible. We see that their world is in influx, there are tears and we are introduced to numerous jeopardy led storylines – such as the family coming to terms with their dad, Caitlyn Jenner's, sex change and relationship woes between Kourtney and her partner Scott – the show is full of angst and drama and fast cuts. The Kardashians' innocent, uncomplicated joyous days of pushing each other in the pool would seem to be a thing of the past.

Appeal for the audience

Audiences seem strangely compelled to share storylines with their friends, making emotional connections with the cast members. There is a clear sense of shared experience and living vicariously through the characters' lives, as the audience share their most intimate moments. It also offers the opportunity to see how the other half live. Few have the riches and glamour of Kim and her sisters. Viewers can indulge and escape, a substitute for real life. Even better they can share in Kim and co's life 24 hours

a day with the added dimension of social media. They can talk directly to her. The attention and scrutiny is present at all times. They're like a friend when you want a gossip, a laugh or a cry.

Reality television has faced some criticism, mostly focussing on the use of the word "reality" with critics arguing that these shows put contributors in artificial situations and people are not really acting themselves. Do characters become a heightened version of themselves? What happens when the cameras stop rolling? Do reality stars shrink back to ordinary folk, in sweat pants doing the same mundane chores as the rest of the world – in the Kardashians case there is a sense that they are always on it, creating new storylines, new dramas all by themselves. When the cameras aren't rolling, they are keeping their fans updated on their lives via social media.

Mechanics of the series

Reality TV shows are large beasts and require careful scheduling, especially when they involve celebrities with busy lives full of engagements. You will see from the credits that many members of the family are executive producers on the show. This would not typically be the case with so called regular 'punters' (TV talk for the contributors on a show.) However, the Kardashians are such a well-known and powerful family, their brand to them is everything and needs to be protected. It is clear that they would not want to give up control of their image entirely, and risk programme makers including any footage that showed them in a way other than the way that they want the world to see them.

Additional cast members also play a central part allowing the programme makers to broaden the audience and wider the range of voices and diversity beyond the immediate family, including boyfriends, friends and celebrity acquaintances to feature in the show.

A schedule would be first agreed with the family and typically on a show such as this the producers would look at the diary and find out what the possible storylines would be in advance. So for example what key events are going on and what stories can be constructed around these events. So if someone is having a baby, that is a key storyline that can be followed and if they are launching an event, such as a new perfume or clothesline, they can allocate time in the schedule accordingly.

The crew will typically be experienced in working in the reality TV genre and tend to be small in size to create intimacy and might work a shift pattern to cover late evening and weekends so that all the important stories are covered. This requires camera and sound operators that can work quickly and adapt to situations as well as almost make themselves invisible so that their presence is not intrusive – with the idea that the contributors of a TV format should almost forget about the cameras. A director and producer will then be deciding what and who to focus on and tying this in with the wider storylines for the series. It is the director and producer's job to be looking for what is commonly referred to as "TV Gold" those moments that will become viral and be shared beyond the TV show, making front page news in tabloid newspapers and magazines and trending on twitter. Kanye announcing he is standing for presidency for example made headlines worldwide. Often the crew will be approved by the family,

certainly in this case as they are executive producers and by the nature of that title this means that they are involved in the editorial decisions at a high level and therefore likely to have authorisation of the final edit before the show is broadcast.

The show is based around the Kardashian family but it is also important to include a range of locations to vary the show so the cameras will need to arrange access to follow the Kardashians abroad and to the various events that they go to, getting permission to film all contributors that appear on the show and location agreements in place.

The visual aesthetic of the show is the job of the director and needs to match the glamour of the Kardashians themselves and their aspirational lifestyle. It borrows from the techniques used in drama to create this look both visually and in terms of building the narrative arc of the series with highs and lows to keep the audience wanting more. Many of these storylines revolve around beauty and fashion – these are important elements in all of the female Kardashians' lives and fashion and beauty products have helped them to build their empire.

Creating drama

Borrowing from the soap opera conventions of story line creation, KUWTK weaves multiple storylines through episodes. It adds themes that run throughout the series (such as the introduction of Caitlin Jenner) but also has self-contained stories so viewers can dip in and out of the season's run. To entice viewers further each episode is named and themed.

"The Proposal" September 5, 2011

Kris Humphries plans to ask Kim to marry him, but an argument between the two makes him wonder if he is proceeding too quickly.

"Vanity Unfair" October 4, 2015

Caitlyn comes out in her first big magazine interview and states things the family considers hurtful; Kim does her best to pick up the pieces.

It reads just like a soap opera. If you scripted it you wouldn't believe it! Amazing how the camera is always there at the right moment. Like soap, the reality show will have elements and story arcs pre-planned so themes can be neatly wrapped up or build to end of season finale.

The Kardashian brand

I admire Kris because she has done an amazing job at taking what was just a television show and building it into a massive empire for the family.
Ryan Seacrest, Executive Producer (Schreffler, 2015)

The Kardashians have gone on to be much bigger than the TV show itself. They are experts at brand building. With a hugely impressive online following across a range of

social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram. They are innovators and constantly looking at how they can maintain their status.

Kris Jenner was the driving force behind the original series but Kim has taken it beyond the series. Kim has over 39 million twitter followers and over 58 million followers on Instagram and these figures are growing bigger every day and are greater than the populations of many countries. Her reach is vast and global. She and the Kardashians have redefined the genre – breaking new territory and reaching new audiences across multiple platforms. The TV show does not exist in a vacuum and is linked to all things Kardashian. According to Forbes magazine's 2015 ranking of the world's highest paid celebrities Kim Kardashian's earnings almost doubled in 2015 to \$53 million from \$28 million in 2014 and as a result Kim has been widely lauded for her business credentials and influence.

Future

Now in its 11th series, can we expect another 150 episodes? Kris Jenner is certainly planning ahead, with an episode screened where the family bought burial plots next to each other. It seems nothing is off limits!

Are we tired of this genre? It may have hit its peak but is still doing big business. Although viewing figures are down, globally viewers are watching on different devices and consuming content in different ways and is not showing signs of

waning if social media buzz is anything to go by. The Kardashians are masters at constantly reinventing storylines. It is all about the drama and the ongoing soap opera of their lives. In October 2015 Kanye West announced he is running for President in 2020– now who saw that coming?

There are many critical views about studying popular culture and in particular a family like the Kardashians – a family interested in material wealth, fashion and beauty but there is a very real connection they have with an audience and this is evident through their on line following and the on-going appeal of the TV show. We have looked at the key ingredients and reasons for their success but ultimately it comes down to the fascination we have with them as people and the skills of the programme makers to have gained their trust and to carefully weave storylines around the Kardashians that continue to appeal to a global audience. It may look like easy television to make, but relies on many sophisticated elements coming together, to make it one of the longest running reality shows in the world.

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Lucy Brown gained a Masters at the British Film Institute/University of London and her television career has found her filming around the world making programmes for the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Nickelodeon and Disney. She has TV credits on BAFTA and RTS award winning children's programmes and the acclaimed flagship architecture series *Grand Designs*. Lucy is Head of Film and Television at the University of Greenwich, and a Principal Lecturer. She travels widely on university initiatives, presenting papers and running masterclasses. Lucy is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, former committee member of the BAFTA Careers Working Group and winner of a Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in International Engagement.

Lyndsay Duthie is an Executive Producer with television credits for ITV, BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5 and SKY. Her career began at ITV where she spent 10 years originating and producing hit programmes, becoming one of the country's youngest series producers aged 23, and part of GEITF's 'ones to watch' alumni. From ITV Lyndsay moved to Endemol, before founding her own company Ice Blue Media. She has served on the Board of Directors for Women in Film & TV (WFTV) and judged at the RTS Awards and International Emmys. Lyndsay is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Principal Lecturer and Course Director for the University of Hertfordshire's Film & TV Programme, and winner of the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Graduate Success.